
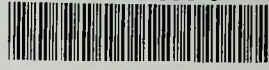


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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

"THE SHAKERS BRIEF ETERNITY"

A Thesis Submitted To:
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Dr. J. H. ... for his
valuable advice and encouragement
while writing this thesis.

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while writing this thesis.

"(The Shakers) recognised no justifiable difference in the quality of workmanship for any object, no gradations in the importance of the task. All must be done equally well. Whether it was the laying of a stone floor in the cellar, the making of closet doors in the attic, or the building of a Meetinghouse, the work required nothing less than all the skill of the workmen".

Charles Sheeler.

This thesis is an investigation into the life, work and art of the Shaker Movement (1774 -) and the considerable upsurge of interest in their design and lifestyle over recent years.

The Shakers were not an aesthetic movement but a religious sect. Remarkable, in their day, as the largest utopian venture in existence, with an estimated four to six thousand members in eighteen principal communities from Main to Kentucky by 1840. (1)

The United Society of Believers - or Shakers as they were better known because of their unusual dance worship - peacefully pursued the vision of their English founder Ann

Lee. They turned away from the rest of society which they simply called the world. They lived in large family groups that were both celibate and communal. There was no procreation and they relied on converts from the outside. They devoted their lives to work and celebrated their love of God in the rousing dance worship and struggle for perfection.

As they created what they saw as a new, more perfect society they also provided a visual environment of such quiet power that it continues to impress the observer even as the Shakers themselves are in steady decline.

Fewer than a dozen Shakers remain today - existing in Sabbathday Lake, Maine and Mount Lebanon, New Hampshire, yet their work endures.

Their design has become renowned for its simplicity and purity of form and line. It has entranced today's public, many of whom believe that by acquiring a Shaker 'piece' one may acquire a part of the serenity and harmony from where it was born. This is a public who aspire to buy into the Shaker life, but do not commit themselves to it.

It is precisely on this that the main body of my investigation will hinge. The Shakers were not initiated to be designers of the nineties, their work epitomised their religious commitment - it was their life. To understand this, I examined and looked at the inner soul that created it, their philosophies, pride and humanitarianism.

Like many diminishing cultures, interest and speculation, inquisitiveness, and selfishness has caused serious disruptions and a severe split within the two remaining communities. Mount Lebanon no longer accepts new Shakers and believes Shaker values will endure but in a different form. Sabbathday Lake chooses a more energetic path, inviting non Shakers to try their way of life in an attempt to keep the spirit alive.

Commercialisation and exploitation has played a major role in the marketing of both genuine and replica Shaker products. Today, Shaker furniture sells from anything up to \$300,000. The appeal of this furniture for the public seems to stem from the changing attitudes and healthier, purer aspirations we strive for today. It evokes for us a time of peace, contentment and reward in life.

I will be discussing the Shaker Chair which, for me, is exemplary of their creative power, life and commitment to God. The care they lavish on any one piece of furniture is unsurpassed today. They preceded the Bauhaus and William Morris in their credos where form must follow function, and I can hardly imagine Morris gaining more 'joy in labour' than the euphoria a Shaker craftsman would receive in his creative endeavours for God.

The first time the 177 reached the block it is...
the police on the police and when they...
the... - "There were 110,000", said...
the... at his...
the... in 1929. It is the largest...
the... of...
the... with...
the... the last...

CHAPTER 1

THE SHAKERS TODAY

The 177... original... New...
... a...
... will be...

... from the...
... the...
... 177...

The 177... the...

By the time lot 177 reaches the block it is raining; the patter on the yellow and white tent muffles the auctioneer's staccato. "Lets start at \$10,000", says Willis Henry at his sixth annual Shaker auction held at the Mount Lebanon site in 1989. It is the largest and most prestigious sale of Shaker antiques in America. His speech accelerates with each lot, showering adjectives like "classic, the best, incredible".

Lot 177 - "Tall revolver chair, maple, applewood, oak, original varnish finish, South Family, New Lebanon N.Y. c1860" - a handsome; high revolving chair with slender legs and spindle back, made a half a mile from where it will be sold.

Henry asks for an opening bid of \$10,000. "\$30,000". This comes from the front row. The audience is stunned into silence, and so the bidding continues until it reaches a massive \$80,000. "SOLD"!

The \$80,000 chair sets another record for Shaker furniture

sold at auction. The buyer, 23 year old David Schorsch, a New York City dealer bought it, he said, because he'd always wanted one.

"Think of all the people that money would feed", says Sister Frances Carr of Sabbathday Lake when told of the \$80,000 chair.

She shakes her head.

The curiosity that led Charles Dickens and thousands of other people to visit the Shakers in the nineteenth century made this famous utopian society one of America's top tourist attractions - a somewhat ironic status for a religious sect that from the beginning had turned its back on the world.

To most outsiders, their life seemed grim; the daily routine of work and prayer, their mundane architecture, plain dress and unadorned walls. But this clearly had appeal, from local farmers out for a Sunday drive to some of the most distinguished figures of the time. As

their carriages jolted into the communal villages, tucked into sweeping valleys or perched on commanding hills, the first impression sightseers had was of great beauty. They were struck immediately with the size of the communities and the absolute neatness of every part of the village. But while visitors found much to admire, the effect was spoiled for most of them by the unremitting simplicity of the architecture. The buildings resembled factories or "human hives", a hostile observer wrote in 1827; "great, staring, red and white manufacturing-looking things".

Visitors who wanted to take a tour of a Shaker community stopped first at the office and store, where Shakers conducted business and offered overnight lodging and meals. Here, too, was the shop which offered a range of small handy items and souvenirs. After leaving the office visitors toured the workshops - forges, carding mills, saw and grist mills, dairies, infirmaries and kitchens, where they saw the Shakers at work.

Observers were usually especially curious to see where the Shakers lived, thus the dwelling houses were another

popular stop. Tourists peered eagerly into private "retiring rooms", or sleeping quarters, and into the large common dining hall and spacious meeting room for weekday services. The combination of communalism and strict separation of the sexes puzzled some outsiders.

Visitors found the buildings as immaculate inside as they were without. Yet as many thought Shaker homes peculiar they found the people who lived in them odder still. Convinced that they were harmless but misguided or slow-witted one remarked "Between a wagon loaded with Shaker females and a wagon loaded with sacks of flour an onlooker would find no difference; in each there is silence and no movement".

We have long since stopped "gawking" at the Shakers and ridiculing the things they made, in fact it is the opposite. Their work has captivated today's public who see and appreciate it for the same characteristics that made it seem so 'rare' to the people of the 1800s. We, now, admire and applaud it for its purity of form, simplicity, durability and most of all its steadfast honesty.

Time has elapsed, since the first visitors to the Shaker communities but we remain as curious as our predecessors, although no longer shocked by what we see. This alternative lifestyle, because of its extraordinary followers, has attracted us even more and we seem to crave to be a part of it.

We must ask ourselves why we buy into and invest in Shaker life and antiques, model our homes and furniture on a way of life that we do not commit ourselves to. It is the spiritual, communal and all-sharing existence that makes the Shakers so distinctive.

Today, the Shaker arts and crafts tradition has become another one of the late twentieth century's newest and 'trendiest fads'. Sabbathday Lake, Maine, the only community left still accepting 'New Shakers' is open to the public. It houses one of the finest collections of Shaker antiques in the world. There is no more furniture produced here and so none is ever sold.

As the public shuffle through each room in the museum, just as their predecessors did, the sounds now are of cameras

clicking and flashes exploding in an attempt to freeze-frame and capture a part of the exquisite and serene environment which lies before them.

The Shakers do not want to be remembered as chairs, they are fading fast and we, the public, are desperately trying to get one last slimpse, one last souvenir from their private retreats. If we are unable to purchase an original, then a fake will do.

Imitation Shaker design is not hard to find. Since I began this thesis, more and more has come to my attention. We are constantly being confronted with these minimalist, pure, earthy interiors in large shapes namely the new 'Pepe' store on South Anne Street, Dublin. They have modelled their display units for accessories on the Shaker storage rooms full of drawers. Very effective, pleasing to the eye, practical and 'ultra modern'. Why was this particular layout chosen for surely the ethics behind Pepe fashions are not those that lie behind Shaker design? Why have they adopted it to suit their particular requirements? These were my initial questions and after investigation and communication with the designers of the store, I discovered that it was a replica of "The Chippi Shop" in Paris and consequently they hadn't been aware of

the Shaker style or design. Ironic surely? This strongly suggests to me that we have no regard for the origin of the design, its relevance to what we are going to use it for and how it will be seen in relation to the overall result.

"The Genuine Shaker Shoe by Ecco"

"The Shaker shoe from Ecco provides you with a stable fit, a construction that is anatomically perfect. The shoe is simple and functional. And these qualities guarantee you a shoe that is pleasing to the eye, functional and comfortable". (1)

This is how Ecco the Danish shoe company have marketed their new range of shoes for healthy feet. They, unlike Pepe, have done their research. They not only give the buyer a brief history of the Shakers in a small booklet they even package their shoes in traditional oval-shaped, dove-tailed, hinged, Shaker boxes. Pure function for pleasant walking, Shaker shoes retail at IR£52.95. The window display advertising their new range incorporates plain pine furniture, a pegged beam of wood and a two

1 Footnote Taken from the marketing booklet of Ecco's Shaker Shoes. See also illustration of same.

drawered desk on which the shoes rest, all characteristics of a Shaker interior.

The present changes in the social climate due to the infiltration of what are termed 'new age' values may be the answer to this obsession with Shaker design. As a whole, the term signifies a revolt against the selfish indulgences of the past decade. Basically the 'new age' values encourage consciousness raising caring and green politics. This is not to say that the consumer has left the materialistic values of the eighties behind.

Certainly not, yet it could be argued that the eighties was a decade of good attitudes and poor quality. There were attempts to revive older traditions but as we see in the reproduction of Shaker antiques the same quality is not achieved.

Other factors contributing to the return to the Shaker style could be that it was a reaction born out of fear. The last decade was dominated by fear, but what we fear has changed and our response to it, I believe has changed. In the early eighties, the prospect of nuclear war constantly intimidated us. Gradually those fears diminished with the reduction in nuclear arms and concern

for the environment became more prevalent. Today, however, those fears have been reinstated and in the midst of a war in the Gulf ⁽²⁾ there seems to be less optimism and less hope in a peaceful and happy future. The Shakers, though centuries before, attempted to maintain a utopian society within which threats such as mass destruction and violence were far removed from everyday life. They lived optimistically and their work was an expression of this faith in a more perfect society. Ultimately, the re-emergence of, and interest in Shaker design is a direct response to the effects that today's public are experiencing in the midst of a very turbulent time.

Tim Lamb and Liz Shirley, founders of the first Shaker shop in England saw the opening in the market for this new age design. They promoted the aesthetics of the puritan style and advocate that quality craftsmanship and natural materials take the place of extravagance and colour. Their displays of twigs, berries, herbs and plants create a rural but sophisticated setting without betraying traditional Shaker ideas.

2 Footnote Since this writing, the war has now ceased, yet prospects of maintaining peace are dim.

How did the Shakers create the designs that remain distinctly their own; born of American traditions infinitely refined and simplified? The Shakers were not an aesthetic movement, but a religious sect and to understand Shaker design, we must look at the inner life that created it.

Shaker history began in America in 1774, when a thirty-nine year old working class woman brought eight followers to New York from Manchester, England. Ann Lee sought to establish a new order of being, more like angels than men. Free from the evils of the corrupt: 'old world', they would live without violence, war, greed, poverty, lust, and in-temperance. As in her vision of Eden before the Fall, men and women would live together in chaste love, at one with each other and God. Celibate Brothers and Sisters would own all property in common, giving what they could and taking what they needed. Ann took Christ as her model, and by emulating his purity, humility and charity showed her followers that Christ's Second Coming had happened in each converted soul. The sect's formal title is the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing.

Believers could not marry, bear children, have private property or maintain contact with the outside world - but the reward she believed was worth the cost. She was called Mother Ann.

With her flock she combed the spiritual pastures of New England, harvesting converts. But she died in 1784, without ever seeing a Shaker village established. In the following decades her successors succeeded in making the scattered converts into settled communities. By 1800, eleven communities had formed. Soon after, the Shakers pushed west, founding two communities in Kentucky, four in Ohio, and one in Indiana. ⁽¹⁾ The gospel was spreading.

It was not easy for the first Believers to make the transition to communal life, or to "gather into order". Shakers faced the spiritual and emotional task of adapting themselves to communal living. Shaker family life required sharing, co-operation, and patience - qualities that the Shakers simply called "union". Each member had to place the needs of the group above self-interest. In their endeavour, they were for all practical purposes

1 Footnote An estimated 6,000 members was reported during the Shakers peak years of the 1840s.

without models.

Other religious groups like the Movarians in Pennsylvania had developed a modified system of communal life but the Shakers had no firsthand knowledge of this sect of German origin. The Movarians, however, were not celibate and as Catholic orders were not communal they were celibate. As a later Shaker put it, his sect consisted of "monks and nuns", "without the bolts and bars". The Shakers in their effort to include men, women and children in a life both celibate and communal, were trading new ground.

The Shakers had an elaborate hierarchical, legal and social structure. The central head-quarters of the Church was in New Lebanon (formed 1787), New York. (2) Under this central ministry there were several bishoprics each comprised of several communities in a relatively coherent geographical area. Communities varied in size but might have anywhere from 250 to 800 people at the peak of the Shaker Movement. Communities were in turn divided

2 Footnote The Community at New Lebanon changed its name to Mount Lebanon in 1861. I have referred to it throughout as Mount Lebanon.

into families of up to 100 people, and these were organised as orders - for example, novitiate, junior and senior. The numbers of orders and families varied according to the community, but there was always one senior family who were the most trusted and respected members of the community. These included the spiritual leaders and the temporal leaders (trustees, who handled legal, financial and business matters; and deacons were in charge of the internal workings of the community). Each family was overseen by two elders and two eldresses, who were appointed by the ministry and usually served a lifelong tenure. (3)

In contrast to the new Republic in which the Shaker movement grew, the Believers' governance was free of political activity and did not include voting. The Shakers were egalitarian - they believed that God loved all people equally and were progressive in their attitude towards women and blacks - but they were not democratic in the usual sense. The Shaker system of leadership evolved instead from precedents established by Mother Ann. She chose her successors on the basis of simple virtue and

3 Footnote See chart on organisation of hierarchy position of the Hancock Community.

competence. Power and privilege, the prerequisites of authority in the outside world, were antithetical to the Shaker's fundamental beliefs. The system, which relied on good sense and a general willingness to co-operate, was not without problems. But it was remarkably successful and was probably the best form of Government for a society that believed in the infinite potential for the goodness in humankind.

Shaker communities operated, then, as extended families. Each had its own dwelling house and workshops, and day-to-day tasks were carried out by family members. The sisters saw to the maintenance of the dwelling, the preparation of meals, the laundry and the up-keep of community clothing and household goods. In addition, they usually operated a dairy, and herb and seed industry, and spinning, weaving, and sewing shops. The brethren did the heavy labour; they worked the fields, tended the animals at the farm and ran such small community industries as tanneries, black-smithing shops, and furniture manufacturies.

Children who came with their parents or as charitable wards, lived in separated girls and boys quarters and were

given duties of their own. From a very early age, their caretakers taught them such activities and skills as they could master and children's products were fully integrated into community life.

The community of Mount Lebanon was influential in shaping the visible world of the Shakers - clothing, buildings, village planning and household articles of all sorts. For the sake of union, Shaker communities sought to look alike, as well as think, act and worship alike. Their standards of simplicity and excellence were based on the teachings of Mother Ann. She was concerned with the eternal life of the soul not with ephemeral things of the earth, such as chairs. Nevertheless, she believed that the outward appearance of things revealed the inner spirit. She cautioned her followers to shun the ultimately hollow pursuit of material goods and taught them to recognise their true wants - to love and be loved, to live in harmony with oneself and others - and to eliminate other wants accordingly. She told them to avoid excess and needless luxuries because they drained energy from the real pursuit of life. With the possessions they had, she told them to keep them in such order that they would know where to find them day or night.

Finally, Ann taught her followers how to work. Because they were building for the Millennium, (4) it was essential to do their best. The purpose of work was as much to benefit the spirit as it was to produce goods. Believers learned that the mastery of craft was a partnership of fools, materials and processes:

"Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live, and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow". (5)

The Shakers planned their heaven on earth to last for a thousand years to come. In 1830, with more than half a century of growth to their credit, the Shakers had no reason to doubt that their success would not continue. Yet although they grew in numbers during the following decade, their energy was that of momentum not growth. No new communities were established. By 1850, the Shaker population had crested and began to drop. The second half of the nineteenth century, witnessed a steady decline.

4 Footnote The Millenial laws were first written in 1821 and stipulated that the Shaker life would exist for a thousand years.

5 Footnote Quoted in Andrews "The People Called Shakers" p.24.

Second generation Shakers grew old and died and fewer converts were received. More and more young people raised by the Shakers chose to leave when they came of age. As a family grew smaller, the few remaining members left their home and moved in with another family in the village. The Believers dismantled the buildings behind them, preferring memories of life to ruined and derelict shells.

In 1875, the Tyringham, Massachusetts, community closed entirely, the first to do so. By 1900, Shakers had dwindled to about two thousand members. By World War 11, only four of the eighteen original communities remained, with no more than a few hundred members altogether.

Various reasons have been suggested for the decline, but one is indisputable. The world on which the Shakers depended for converts changed enormously in the nineteenth century. The inexorable forces of westward expansion and industrialisation brought so much change, so quickly that the nation in 1900 was a different country from America in 1800. The Civil War provides the most dramatic evidence of the stress caused by such profound change. The slow fading of the Shaker movement was quieter but no

less the result of American change.

Today as fewer than a dozen Shakers exist in the two of the nineteen communities, parts of former villages have been converted to other uses such as schools, hospitals, Catholic Orders, prisons and private homes. Yet those Shakers who remain have a general optimism and a spirit that looks forward not back.

"THE HANDS DROP OFF, BUT THE WORK GOES ON".

The distinction between art and craft has always been a matter of both confusion and concern and many are steadfast in their view that different criteria should be used to judge the merits of objects in each category. In the work of the Shakers, utility is transcended by purity of form and line, and our appreciation of the object is elevated beyond a sense of function. These works were designed and executed with purpose and pride, with simplicity as their hallmark.

The period of the Shaker's greatest achievement, and the classic period of Shaker design began c1820 and continued for the next quarter century. With adequate labour and resources, the Shakers created an environment that was uniquely their own - colourful, ⁽¹⁾ graceful and efficient, in an uncluttered way. Although they retained much that was old, Shakers everywhere designed and built spacious new dwelling houses and workshops. During the period between 1820 - 1850 they produced such classic designs as built-in storage units with drawers and cupboards, the round stone barn, the dual freestanding spiral staircases, the washing machine, water resistant fabric,

1 Footnote The Shakers stained their furniture in bright blues, greens and oranges. Even though they were opposed to decoration, colour was frequently used.

metal pens, an apple corer-quarterer, and they were probably the first to pack seeds in paper packets. Most Shaker inventions were not patented; a patent smacked of selfishness. To ease the way for others was reward enough.

It is easy to see the harmony of proportion in Shaker design that transforms common objects into works of uncommon grace. The reasons for this quiet beauty are less apparent, particularly because the Shakers themselves were not self-conscious about it. Their journals rich in detail on many topics are almost mute on aesthetics and design. The unassuming diary entries of even the finest craftspeople - "made a table", or "finished a silk-kerchief" - yield few clues to the source of their inspiration. No more revealing is the simple praise - "nice", "neat", or "well done", - that Shakers gave each other.

Some would argue that due to their strict rules and celibate lifestyle to channel their energy into producing such harmonious objects was the only release they got. The men and women who became Shakers were ordinary people, but the circumstances in which they chose to live produced

an extraordinary opportunity for creativity. To a degree that we can scarcely imagine, the Shakers were free of distractions. They stayed at home, worked quietly, and gave a part of each day to meditation.

Above all else, Shaker life freed Believers from the merciless prison called style. They did not care for what the world considered fashionable. It is no accident that the best, purest examples of Shaker design date from the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when the first generation of Shaker Children reached their prime active years. These Shakers did not so much create a new design as endlessly refine an inherited one. As worldly taste grew increasingly ornate in the mid-nineteenth century, the difference between Shaker and worldly homes became more pronounced. The furniture makers continued to produce simplified versions of the plain, Federal style country furniture, prevalent around 1800.

As Shaker's contemporaries found their buildings, furnishings and clothing old-fashioned and lacking in style, it was of no consequence to them. It might even have pleased them, as proof of their own freedom from

passing trends. "The beautiful as you call it is absurd and abnormal", as one Shaker informed a visitor, "it has no business with us". (2) The Shakers did not spurn beauty, they simply re-invented it.

It was wrong to suppose that Shaker design was bound by endless restrictions. The Shakers had just one: do not make what is not useful. They saw every reason to make necessary things beautiful, according to their own understanding of beauty. Of the elements universally available to designers, the Shakers rejected only applied ornament as unnecessary. The rest, colour, pattern, line, form, proportion, they freely and joyeously used. Perhaps, the elimination of superficial decoration gave Believers a keener eye for the shape of a thing and the relationship of its parts.

There is one object which epitomises their religious commitment, sincerity, strength and most of all genius in craftsmanship that is "The Chair".

2 Footnote Quoted in Charles Nordhoff "The Communist Societies of the United States" (New York Dover Publications 1966) p.164.

A Shaker ladder-back chair typifies the Shaker approach to life and possessions. Straight forward and unadorned, it nevertheless reveals features intended for comfort and convenience. The seat is made of woven cloth tape, more comfortable than splint or rush. The chair angles back at a slant to provide relaxed seating and is light enough to be easily portable and to hang from the pegboard.

The back posts have a unique feature - wooden ball-and-socket "tilter" feet that keep the back legs flat on the floor when the sitter leans back. The tilters are held in place by narrow leather strips threaded through a hole in the foot and through a hole drilled in the leg a few inches above the foot. Such feet were becoming common on Shaker chairs by the 1830s. In spite of admonitions against leaning backward in chairs, the habit persisted, and the practical Shakers adapted their chairs to suit. The main advantage was the protection of floorboards, most often made of soft pine, from the little dents that the hardwood legs of ordinary chairs would make.

Although the tilting foot was at first considered an improvement in chair design, the hollowing of the bottom

of the leg and the drilling weakened the chair at the point of greatest stress. It was a promising idea but not a good one in the long run. Making and repairing the tilts no doubt began to seem less practical with the passage of time and one solution was to stop making them.

Another was to make both foot and socket in metal and attach the unit to the chairs rear posts. This was the brain-child of George O'Donnell in 1852. He had developed a new and improved mode of preventing the wear and tear of carpets and the marring of floors, caused by the corners of the back posts of chairs as they take their natural motion of rocking backward and forward.

Unlike some of their worldly contemporaries, the Shakers did not approve of furniture painted to resemble ornate woods and so grain painted Shaker furniture is extremely rare. But some furniture-makers had no objection to naturally patterned wood and in fact may have selected patterned woods for special projects. They did however, stain their woods and small household furnishings such as boxes.

Chair-making had a long history at New Lebanon, New York, in the Second and South Families. (3) The exceptional quality of this chair indicates that it was made for home use and not for sale. (4) The Shakers in New Lebanon made chairs from 1789 until 1942 to supply their own community, other Shaker communities, and a worldly market. (5) Although the nature of the business changed considerably during this century and a half, the chairs themselves remained remarkably similar. The business enjoyed its peak years during the 1870s under the guidance of Robert Wagan (1833 - 1883), whose marketing skills, including the development of a strong mail-order business through an illustrated catalogue, resulted in nationwide sales. The chairs made at New Lebanon were the only furniture produced by the Shakers with significant sales to the outside world.

In the 1860s, the Shakers in the South family, New Lebanon, added "a new kind of chair, which turns on a screw pivot, every which way", (6) to their line of chairs produced for

3 Footnote Shaker families were recognised and named depending on their geographical position within the community.

4 Footnote See illustration No 9

5 Footnote The Shakers did not mass produce furniture but they did sell to the world during their peak production years.

6 Footnote Illustration No 2.

sale. These "stool chairs", or "turning chairs", were available in several different sizes and styles. The seats of some of the chairs were designed to be raised or lowered by means of a screw device. The spindles were made of bentwood or wire.

Although the revolving chairs were handsome and convenient, they often developed structural problems, particularly in the arched feet. This problem is avoided though in the four-legged higher chair, ⁽⁷⁾ with all the weight being supported by the single stretcher at the top. The bulges on legs are functional: they strengthen the area where the stretchers join, and the slim "waists" between them reduce weight where greater thickness is not required.

7 Footnote See illustration 2

The Shakers and their followers by whom the Shakers lived
 about two important religious and moral beliefs and
 their views in terms of furniture design. Many their
 designs were - "Beauty counts no quality", "anything may
 be made perfect when perfectly serves the purpose
 intended. It was believed", and "every form reflects a
 truth". It is particularly this last that makes a
 central point before William's much quoted "Form follows
 function", the polar opposite of Puritanism.

CHAPTER 4

SHAKERS AND OTHERS

It can be said that the story of modern furniture begins
 in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, when furniture
 could be mass produced in factories by machines instead
 of being hand made grown by piece. Although for a long
 time a clear split between technology and art remained -
 one inevitable and inevitable challenge the engineer,
 while designers were generally content to have technology
 from your angle, and the potential of technology was
 seen only by a few forward thinking designers. In this
 world of rapid change and aesthetic instability the
 wilderness stood still. The furniture of the Shakers
 represented of the modern movement and the profound
 vision of Richard Wright. The Shakers developed the idea

The rules and regulations by which the Shakers lived reveal how important religious and moral beliefs can be, even in terms of furniture design. Among their credos were - "Beauty rests on utility", "Anything may be called perfect which perfectly answers the purpose for which it was designed", and "Every force evolves a form". It is particularly this last that evokes a hundred years before Sullivan's much quoted "Form follows function", the modern principle of functionalism.

It can be said that the story of modern furniture begins in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, when furniture could be mass produced in factories by machines instead of being hand made piece by piece. Although for a long time a clear split between technology and art remained - new materials and inventions challenged the engineer, while designers were generally content to draw inspiration from past styles, and the potential of technology was seen only by a few forward thinking designers. In this world of rapid change and aesthetic nostalgia, two achievements stand out; the furniture of the Shakers (precursors of the modern movement) and the bentwood chairs of Michael Thonet. The Shakers, developed the idea

decades before the Bauhaus, that form follows function, totally rejected all decoration in architecture, household goods and furniture, believing it to be sinful.

The Shakers were unique in their methods, their inspiration and their design, yet were not alone in their attempt to create a visual environment of purposefulness and quiet beauty.

"Have nothing in your homes that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful"

"Hopes and Fears for Art"

William Morris wrote in 1882. His principal concern, in contrast to that of the Shakers, in both theory and practice, was with the potentialities of human work. Morris believed that men and women should derive pleasure from their labour and that, those who used the things they made would themselves gain pleasure from them. In variance to the Shaker ethics, the key to this "joy in labour" was he thought sound ornament. To him an artist

was simply a workman who determines that, whatever else happens, his work shall be excellent and one of the most significant ways in which this excellence was made manifest was through the decoration of workmanship. The Shaker artisans and craftsmen did not make furniture for their own pleasure they created it and mastered their skills because it was a gift given to them by God, and by using this talent they believed they would come closer to him. Morris differed too from Shaker theories in that he believed that human productive work ought to involve an imaginative or ornamental dimension which went beyond the constraints of function and necessity. He, like the Shakers, was opposed to modern capitalism and the factory system because for him these things conspired to destroy the pleasurable, imaginative and joyous aspects of men and women's work. Morris would have detested the idea that machines might replace exciting or artistic work, because they could make anything except a work of art.

The Shakers did not mass produce furniture on a factory assembly line basis. The furniture and chairs they sold were all created with as much care, attention and thought as they would have been if they were being made for their own use. Each piece was, in itself, undoubtedly

a work of art, carved individually by hand, assembled and stamped by its maker. To say they rejected the method of factory manufacturing is true because they never adopted any methods of production that were in use at any one time. They were rigid in their design and paid little attention to contemporary style.

Although Morris went some distance in offering a vision of men and women engaged in creative and decorative labour in union with nature and at peace with each other and the world, the Shakers had already achieved it. Today we are in a better position than ever to resolve the great dilemmas of Morris' thought: that is how 'spiritual', 'artistic' and 'aesthetic' work and values can flourish in a secular society.

Shaker furniture is outstanding by the very fact that they themselves understood their materials, lavished care on them and used only natural and simple dyes and woods which were all treated with subtlety and the understanding of its qualities, this is what produced the beauty of their objects even without the intervention of art.

This beauty, today, has become a very marketable quality, but it seems that the poorer the workmanship as both a piece of art and in its technique of execution the more likely it is to find favour with the public. The imitation Shaker furniture we see on our high streets is not nor ever will be the original hand-crafted pieces, yet we still admire the design even though it has been mass produced in factories across the world. Surely this says something about our aspirations towards a better quality of life. We are not naive enough to think that everyone could afford an original "Shaker piece" so the market lies open for those of us less fortunate and particular and offers us a fake instead, who'll know the difference?

Charles Sheeler, the American painter, says about Shaker objects and furniture -

"I don't like these things because they are old but in spite of it. I'd like them better still if they were made yesterday then they would afford proof that the same kind of creative power is continuing".

Sheeler's life and work was greatly influenced by the

shaker's aesthetic and design. He admired the warmth and richness of it, the wood, the soft graceful contours, the velvety surfaces and above all the modesty of the creator.

This 'creative power' is not continuing - it has been stunted and over-run by a quick and, granted, efficient method of production. This production seemingly appeals to our deeper psychological needs, that is our hidden fears, desire for identity and so on. Consumerism has made us victims of persuasion. We are deluded into thinking that the aesthetic, peaceful quality of one Shaker object may ease our traumatic existence in this turbulent world. The earthy quality that these objects exude could possibly bring us back to be at one with nature, our environment and perhaps ourselves.

The practical and egalitarian values residing in Shaker arts - as well as such aesthetic principles as emphasis on line and on regular geometric shape and avoidance of ornament were also a part of the credo espoused by the Bauhaus movement in the early twentieth century. The Bauhaus employed industrial materials and designed deliberately streamlined forms with self-evident construction.

yet, the Bauhaus design was cold compared to that of the Shakers even though they were sympathetic to the Shaker idea, where form must follow function. Every part of an object must have a function and unnecessary decoration serves no purpose and, therefore, should not be applied.

CONCLUSION

One cannot say with certainty why the Shakers made beautiful things; perhaps this is unknowable. The source of inspiration has had many names in human history from the muse to the unconscious. The Shakers, themselves, had a simple answer. They called their creative spirit a gift. "If you improve in one talent, God will give you more", they said. The Shakers were not conscious of themselves as "designers" or "artists", as those terms are understood in modern times. But they clearly worked to create a visible world in harmony with their inner life: simple, excellent, stripped of vanity and excess. Work and worship were not separate in the Shaker world. The line between heaven and earth flickered and danced. "A man can show his religion as much in measuring onions as he can in singing glory hal(le)lu(j)ah", observed one Believer.

We in the world miss a lot about what it means to be a Shaker, perhaps its like being colour blind, there are hues the rest of us just cannot see. For me the most appealing thing about Shaker design is its optimism. Those who would lavish care on a chair, a basket, a clothes hanger, or a wheelbarrow, clearly believe that life is

worthwhile. And the use of every material - iron, wool, silk, tin, stone - reveals the same grace, as if the artisans were linked in their collective endeavour in ways that transcend understanding. It is no exaggeration to call Shaker design "other" worldly. In freeing themselves from worldly taste, they created a purity of design that endures.

The final amen has yet to be murmured; those left remind us that they are not dead yet. But nostalgia intrudes. We see them as if looking through a stereopticon from an attic trunk. Today, the Shakers in both remaining communities continue the traditions of the Believers who went before them. The Sisters at Canterbury, New Hampshire, observe the Sabbath privately. Primarily, because of their age and health, they no longer deem it necessary to gather in the meeting room or meetinghouse. The small Shaker family at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, however, assembles in the Meetinghouse or meeting room. As always, visitors are welcome to share in the service.

Much of their work, unfortunately, has vanished with their demise. The fields that were diligently ploughed by Brethren have grown back into woods, the shirts and

sheets that sisters stitched have long since fallen to rags and disappeared. What does remain of Shaker work testifies to the makers' conviction that what they did really mattered.

How we as consumers today see it is an example of how far removed we are from producing quality goods in harmony with the process, material and design. We can never attain this open line to heavenly creativity, making fools of ourselves in our 'humble' attempts.

Rising out of the silence in the Meeting house, the voices of the remaining Shakers echo - somehow transformed, all but angelic - a familiar heart song. To hear "Simple Gifts" sung in this room is as close as we could get to their heaven.

'Tis a gift to be simple,
 'Tis a gift to be free;
 'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be;
 And when we find ourselves in the place just right;
 'Twill be in the valley of love and delight ...
 Amen.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

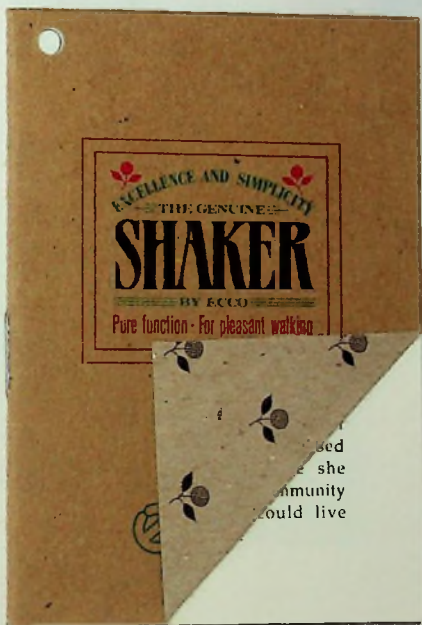
1. A Shaker Room.
2. Shaker Revolving Chair.
3. Shaker dwellings.
4. Dove-tailed hinged oval boxes, stained with natural dyes.
5. Ecco promotional Leaflet.
6. Tim Lamb, Liz Shirley Design Display from their first Shaker Shop.
7. Chart of hierarchy position of Hancock Community.
8. Inside of dwelling showing two doors from which each sister and brother entered and left.
9. Example of Shaker ladder-back chair which angles at the back for comfort.
10. Garden seed packets packed in brown paper invented by the Shakers.
11. The symmetry of the staircase epitomising the creative power of the Shakers. A stairwell made to heaven.



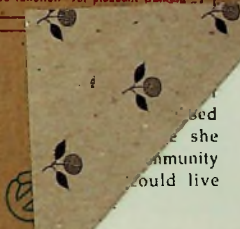








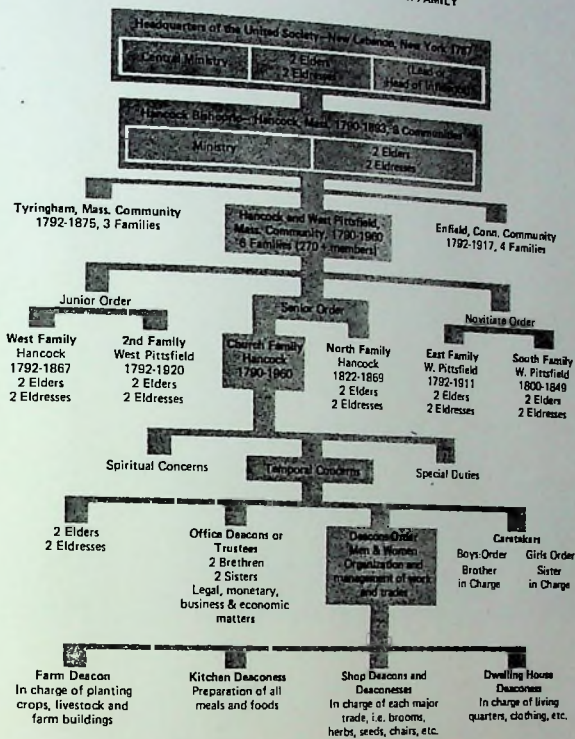
EXCELLENCE AND SIMPLICITY
THE GENUINE
SHAKER
BY ECCO
Pure function - For pleasant walking



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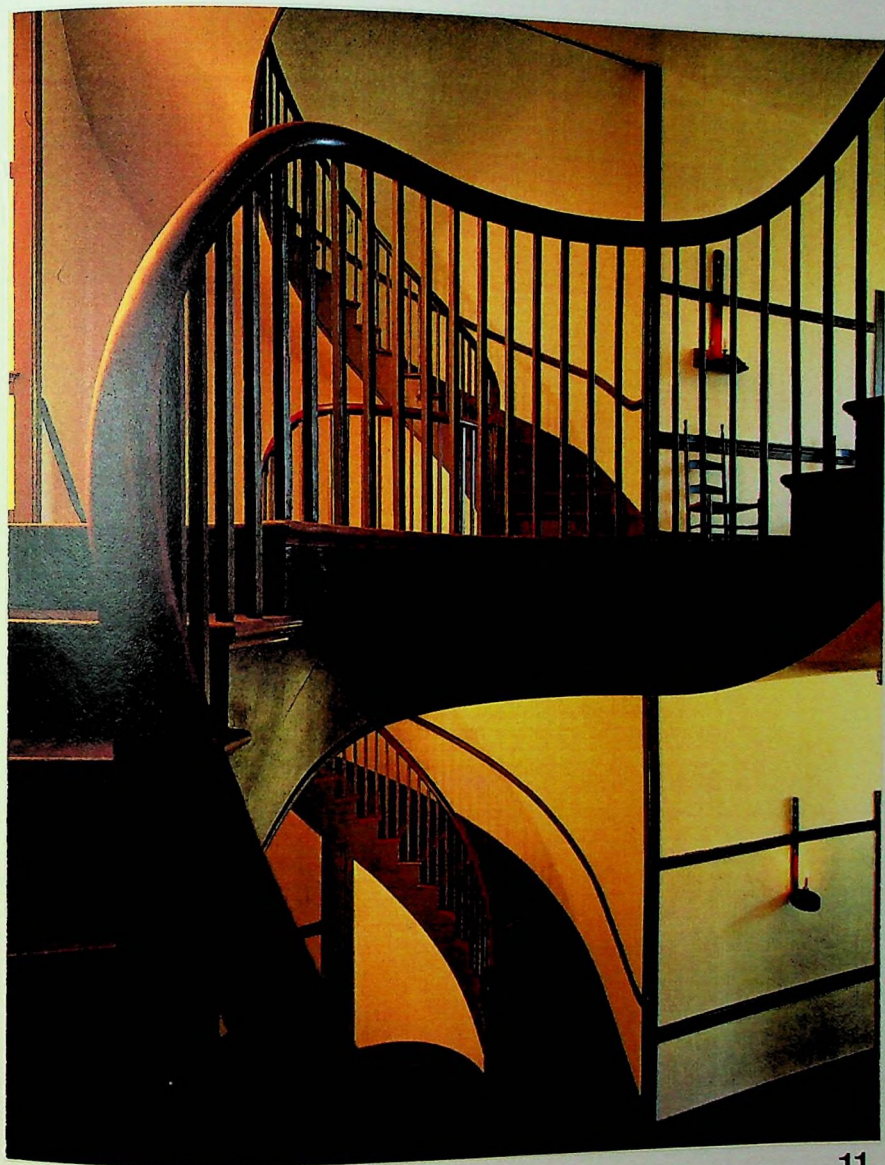
**GOVERNMENT AND ORGANIZATION
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